

Robert Hanna

Independent philosopher

Visiting research professor, PUC-PR Brazil

Webpage: <https://colorado.academia.edu/RobertHanna>

Paper title: “Kant, Radical Agnosticism, and Methodological Eliminativism about Things in Themselves”

Short version:

1. In his paper, “Analytic Work on Kant—Idealism, Things in Themselves, and the Object of Knowledge,” Robert Howell says that a philosophically satisfactory resolution of all-too-familiar problems about Kant’s views on the object of knowledge and the nature of things in themselves should meet three conditions:

- (i) it should be reasonably faithful to Kant’s views,
- (ii) it must show that his views are internally consistent (and that his major arguments are valid), and
- (iii) it must not rest on premises that are themselves philosophically implausible.

Then Howell proceeds to examine several attempts by recent or not-so-recent analytically-oriented Kantians—Peter Strawson, Rae Langton, Henry Allison, and Desmond Hogan—to provide an account of Kant’s views that meets these conditions, and finds them all wanting in various respects.

Howell concludes that it would be philosophically good to find a satisfactory resolution of these problems, but also suspects that no such resolution will be found.

I fully agree with Howell’s three conditions of adequacy on a philosophically satisfactory resolution of the problems, and also fully agree that it would be philosophically good to find a resolution of them.

But I sharply disagree that no such resolution can be found.

Indeed, I believe that I've found such a resolution—and have been steadily publishing about it for the last 15 years.

2. In my book *Kant, Science, and Human Nature* (OUP, 2006)—

< https://www.academia.edu/21558510/Kant_Science_and_Human_Nature >

—and in other articles and books before and since then (including defenses of several of the most important background assumptions of my argument, in *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* [OUP, 2001], and most recently, *Cognition, Content, and the A Priori* [OUP, 2015]), I've argued for the following four Kantian doctrines:

(i) what I call the *Two Concept or Two Property* theory of things in themselves (TC/TP),

(ii) what I call *Weak or Counterfactual Transcendental Idealism* (WCTI),

(iii) what I call *Kantian Radical Agnosticism* about things in themselves (KRA), and

(iv) what I call *Kantian Methodological Eliminativism* about things in themselves (KME).

3. TC/TP says that Kant's distinction between empirically real, directly perceivable manifest objects (comprising both "appearances" and "objects of experience") and thing in themselves (= positive noumenal objects of the understanding, i.e., *Verstandeswesen*, such that, if they were to exist, would be non-empirical, non-spatiotemporal, and constituted by intrinsic non-relational properties) is best captured by a corresponding concept-dualism and metaphysical property-dualism, with no further ontological commitments as to the instantiation or non-instantiation of positive noumenal properties.

4. WCTI says that Kant's transcendental idealism is best captured by the synthetic a priori counterfactual thesis to the effect that, necessarily, the manifest world exists only if, if cognizers like us (i.e., "human" cognizers in the sense that they possess essentially the same sorts of innately specified cognitive and practical

faculties/powers as we do) *were to exist*, then they *would be able to know* that world directly through sensible intuitions, objectively valid concepts, and judgments of experience, and through also analytic and synthetic a priori judgments/propositions, to some non-trivial extent.

5. KRA says that we can and do know a priori that we cannot know *either* the nature of things in themselves *or* whether things in themselves exist or do not exist, nor can we cognize (in the narrow, B edition sense of *Erkenntnis*) any facts about things in themselves or their negations, nor can we prove (in the strict scientific sense) any facts about things in themselves or their negations.

6. And KME about things in themselves says that for the specific purposes of working out a philosophically adequate anthropocentric, “human-faced” metaphysics of transcendental idealism, i.e., WCTI, we can completely ignore things in themselves.

7. The arguments for TC/TP and for WCTI are somewhat long and involved, since they also require interpretations and defenses of Kant’s analytic/synthetic distinction, his empirical realism, and Kantian Non-Conceptualism, as well as close, critical readings and interpretations of the Refutation of Idealism, the Transcendental Aesthetic, and the chapter on Phenomena and Noumena.

So obviously I can’t, and won’t, repeat them here.

But in any case, they can be found in glorious technicolor detail in chs. 3-5 of *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* and in chs. 1-4, 6, and 8 of *Kant, Science, and Human Nature*.

8. In the rest of this paper, then, I’ll focus on unpacking and defending KRA and KME, and also briefly indicate how they are internally related to TC/TP and WCTI.

A preview of the basic argument for KRA can be found in “If God’s Existence is Unprovable, Then Is Everything Permitted? Kant, Radical Agnosticism, and Morality” —

<https://www.academia.edu/6351404/If_Gods_Existence_is_Unprovable_Then_Is_Everything_Permitted_Kant_Radical_Agnosticism_and_Morality>

And a preview of the basic argument for KME can be found in “Kant, the Copernican Devolution, and Real Metaphysics,” the most recent version of which I’ve attached to the e-mail correspondence relating to this paper.